

OF UNFETTERED LIGHT AND LIMITLESS ENERGY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF
GREGORY CREWDSON'S *BENEATH THE ROSES*.

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The Berkshires of western Massachusetts is a special place. Nestled at the southern end of the Green Mountain range, and part of the larger Appalachian system-the oldest mountain chain in North America, these landscapes and rivers are a rich environment where humans have interacted with this space in creative and spiritual ways for millennia. Humans have not always had, or made the best time of it here, starting perhaps with a European-vectored smallpox outbreak which killed or drove away nearly all of the indigenous people living in the area in the 17th century. However, the land around what has become Pittsfield Massachusetts remains a space for culture and wonder, home to art houses, craft production, museums, and schools.¹ Yet all is not picturesque in western Massachusetts. Industrialization, a concomitant feature of the Anthropocene, continues to levy devastating effects on the region. Land, skies, rivers, and people are poisoned by pollution from mass production and profit-seeking which incentivize the dumping of waste into the environs. More recently, the region and the families who live there are threatened by fracking as petrochemical firms continue their extractive drive to produce the energy consistent with the demands of contemporary American life.² Tourism, the financial lifeblood for local artisans, craftspersons, innkeepers, and other small-scale labor sectors of the economy, brings both millions of dollars to the region annually as well as congestion and the pollution of cars, vans, trucks, and busses full of visitors eager to experience the magic and wonder of the region.³ When talking about or producing art inspired by this unique area of North

¹ For example, see “Museums, Historic Sites, and Gardens in the Berkshires.” *The Berkshires*. Last Modified 5 November 2017. http://berkshires.org/business_category/museums-historic-sites-gardens/

² Julie Eddy, “Eye on the Pipelines: Opposition gathers to network of natural gas pipelines from the ‘fracking’ fields.” *The Berkshire Edge*, 11 June 2014, <https://theberkshireedge.com/eye-pipelines-opposition-gathers-network-natural-gas-pipelines-fracking-fields/>.

³ Clarence Fanto, “Berkshire County tourism booming, according to Visitor's Bureau report.” *The Berkshire Edge*. 22 November 2015, <http://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/berkshire-county-tourism-booming-according-to-visitors-bureau-report,298543>

America, it is, therefore, necessary to consider the environmental implications of socioeconomic development, both on the landscape and the people who live in the region. Countless artists, writers, and other creative individuals --Hawthorne, Melville, and Rockwell stand out as perhaps the most recognizable --have called The Berkshires home. For Gregory Crewdson, a prominent name in contemporary art, this is the area of North America where he produced some of his most iconic images.

Gregory Crewdson's cinematic, tableaux photographs often depict an anonymous, banal, and tension-filled life in suburban and rural communities. Working as a self-described American realist⁴ and strongly influenced by a tradition of American vernacular artists, including work by Arbus, Eggleston, Friedlander, and Hopper⁵, Crewdson actively seeks to construct or highlight points of tension between landscapes, people, and their communities in the photographs he produces. In his *Beneath the Roses* project,⁶ Crewdson's application of a multitude of artistic influences informs his production of visual culture; one that is at once pleasing in the way he uses color and light to convey the richness of the every day and provocative in the questions he poses viewers about the quotidian nature of contemporary human life outside of the cityscape. Underpinning these depictions of simply-lived human experiences, Crewdson constructs narratives and sustains assumptions about the very foundation of contemporary American life; namely an unintermittent and perpetual access to energy. While Crewdson eschews deeper

⁴ Bradford Morrow, "Gregory Crewdson," BOMB 61 (1997), Accessed 26 September, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2090/gregory-crewdson>.

⁵ Gregory Crewdson, Craig Burnett, Estelle Af Malmbourg, Jens Erdman Rassmussen, and Felix Hoffman. *In a Lonely Place* (New York: Abrams, 2011), 15-19

⁶ I use the term "project" as a way of capturing the artistic production and exhibition of the images in this series of photographs produced between 2003 and 2008. These photographs have appeared in books, gallery exhibitions, documentary films, as well as images which are readily available from various sources on the internet.

political meanings and critiques⁷ of late capitalist culture in *Beneath the Roses*, his world building --from production processes to thematic representations --rests upon a consumption of and availability to energy that is directly at odds with the very people and places which are the subject of his artistry.

What follows is a reading of two images from Gregory Crewdson's *Beneath the Roses*. I am interested in exploring how the viewer perceives the representation of energy in both the photographs themselves, as well as the underlying production of Crewdson's work. The heart of my argument rests on the premise that Crewdson's production of photographs in *Beneath the Roses* contributes to the unsustainable use of resources which underpin the very psychological, social, and material tensions he is seeking to portray. My focus on energy usage, and more broadly environmental concerns, are consistent with the scholarship and tradition of environmental humanities and ecocriticism. As Braddock and Irmischer contend, art history scholars can respond to the real and present danger of environmental crises by orienting their scholarship which fosters cultural solutions to ecological emergencies through, "a transformation of environmental perception and historical understanding," and participates in the ongoing environmental turn in the humanities.⁸ This response to present environmental conditions comes in the form of reading humanities work by grasping "the full intricacies of our imbrication with energy systems (and with fossil fuels in particular)" so that we can "map out other ways of being, behaving, and belonging in relation to both old and new forms of energy."⁹ In other words,

⁷ "These pictures capture a sense of despair, of poverty, but they are not political." Gregory Crewdson speaking in *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*. Directed by Ben Shapiro. Zeitgeist Films 2012, DVD.

⁸ Alan C Braddock and Christoph Irmischer, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 2-3.

⁹ Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, "Introduction: On the Energy Humanities." *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 3.

humanities scholars interested in unpacking and rethinking how culture, economies, and human life itself is energy- and petro-dependent can start by exploring how forms of energy are represented in, and facilitate the production of, contemporary artistry and thus to think about sustainable modes of production and expression. Each of the photographs I analyze serves to reinforce an interpretation that Crewdson's art rests on a reliable and limitless access to energy, one that has profound consequences for the community he utilizes for his work but is never interrogated by the photographs he produces. By unpacking the broader aspects of Crewdson's work, I seek to highlight the deleterious effects of Crewdson's photographs in both ignoring real environmental issues that are impacting the very subjects he is photographing, as well as pointing a way towards rethinking about artistic production and representation in more sustainable ways.

One of the interesting aspects of conducting contemporary artistic critique is the unfettered access to information in the ubiquitous commentary and interviews available from painters, sculptors, digital artists, and photographers. Biographic information about artists, as well as statements of intentionality, practice, and craft dominate the cultural bandwidth and popular discourse in more voluminous and accessible ways that previous generations of artistic consumers could not imagine. Rare is the Thomas Pinchon or similarly-private artists in an age of self-promotion and market-based artistry; for the consuming public and hungry museums feed on the very faire artists serve through their production, interviews, speaking engagements, and other connections with their audiences. To this end, it is rather easy to locate the photographer Gregory Crewdson's approach to his artistic craft. The son of a psychoanalyst father, Gregory Crewdson was born in 1962 and grew up in an urban, bourgeois setting in Brooklyn New York,

replete with siblings, a progressive school education, and regular family vacations to the woods of western Massachusetts; sites of much of his later artistry including *Beneath the Roses*.

Crewdson's formal training in photography came in undergraduate work at SUNY Purchase and a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Art, where Crewdson currently serves as the graduate director of photography. Crewdson's *curriculum vitae* reads like a laundry list of leading galleries and exhibition sites: from well-established venues such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum, to more eclectic, but still leading edge galleries such as the Houston Center for Photography, London's White Cube, and various Gagosian galleries around the world.¹⁰ All this is to say that Gregory Crewdson has both the pedigree and practice which locate him at the very heart of contemporary photographic art in the 21st century, a position which comes with the expectation of critique of both the themes he conveys in his art as well as the underlying political economy of his work.

Crewdson's approach to photography and artistry rests on his interests in exploring psychological dilemmas, paradoxes, and unanswerable questions. Such production is very personal to Crewdson, "Everything in the photographs: the birds, the iconography, the images, and probably most directly, the actual casts of my body parts, deal with my own psychology. They are used as tropes to investigate my interior life. I want to take familiar tropes like the suburban home or aspects of the landscape and project onto them some kind of personal meaning."¹¹ Crewdson's artistic practice rests on an elliptical understanding of creativity and

¹⁰ Biographic information on Gregory Crewdson compiled from a variety of sources, including: Morrow, "Gregory Crewdson,"; Crewdson *et. al.*, *In a Lonely Place*, 15-19; The GROUND Editors, "Gregory Crewdson-An Interview With," *The GROUND*, 2 May 2013, <http://www.thegroundmag.com/gregory-crewdson-an-interview-with/>; Gagosian Gallery, "Gregory Crewdson-Artist Biography," *Gagosian Gallery*, <http://www.gagosian.com/artists/gregory-crewdson>; Amy Larocca, "Loneliness and Multitudes: Gregory Crewdson's Singular Approach." *New York Magazine*, 30 May 2008. <http://nymag.com/arts/all/process/45584/>.

¹¹ Morrow, "Gregory Crewdson"

production; "I believe very strongly that every artist has a central story to tell. The struggle is to tell that story over and over again in visual form. It's like the defining story of who you are."¹² For Crewdson, this story is about understanding how to make sense of his own life in the ordinary cleavages and settings of small-town life, outside of the urban, elite existence where he makes his work and home. Interestingly, there is an othering quality to the work that Crewdson does in these small Massachusetts towns; where Crewdson is a "city boy totally uninterested in the city as artistic subject" who comes to document a constructed quotidian community in manufactured still lifes.¹³

Whereas much of the commentary, critique, and Crewdson's explication of *Beneath the Roses* addresses the psychological and artisanal aspect of these photographs, there is little to no treatment of his work from an environmental standpoint. Crewdson's perspective and practice about the environs that are the subject and stage for his work in *Beneath the Roses* is sparse, if not contradictory. An avid swimmer, Crewdson regularly plunges through the lakes in and around Pittsfield for hours at a time, yet his commentary reveals a view of the natural world as a utilitarian means understanding the human experience: "I'm interested in using the iconography of nature and the American landscape as surrogates or metaphors for psychological anxiety, fear, or desire."¹⁴ While Crewdson is interested in exploring, or perhaps exploiting, "the relationship between nature and domesticity, particularly some kind of disturbance of the landscape and disturbance of normality,"¹⁵ Crewdson's inspiration and pre-shoot work comes in the form of

¹² Gregory Crewdson: *Brief Encounters*.

¹³ Larocca, "Loneliness and Multitudes."

¹⁴ Morrow, "Gregory Crewdson"

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

“driving around and around familiar old Pittsfield”¹⁶ and related towns to find abandoned buildings, unfettered light, or a sense of space aligned to the narrative he wishes to express. Crewdson is enthusiastic to reflect upon his childhood and his craft during interviews but is cagy about discussing the ways in which the production of his tableaux may be impacting the communities he considers, even declining to directly address questions about his funding sources for making *Beneath the Roses*.¹⁷ While Crewdson gains some measure of familiarity with the subjects who appear in his photographs, he and his crew of approximately forty cinematographers, light riggers, set designers, production assistants, and more are rightly interlopers in these small towns, consuming resources, clogging roads, and temporarily reorienting community relations in the pursuit of a single shot. One wonders the extent to which Crewdson and company consider the impact of their artistic interventions into the Berkshire communities, or if he even considers more sustainable ways in which to produce his work.

In “Untitled” (Figure 1)¹⁸ --hereafter colloquially referred to as “The Madison” --a solitary white woman sits on the curb outside of The Madison bar. Her gaze is off to the distance, perpendicular to the smoke-laced vanishing point of the photograph. The woman’s look, to the extent to the viewer can perceive it, is one of contemplation. Dressed in jeans, a tank top, and boots, hallmarks of working-class dress in small-town Massachusetts staged in this photograph, the woman dually represents the exhaustion of the workday or an evening spent inside the bar. The open door of The Madison bar suggests twin possibilities for the woman; she is contemplating entering or reflecting on her time inside. The photograph is staged at dusk, what

¹⁶ Larocca, “Loneliness and Multitudes.” Crewdson also discusses this process as he drives throughout scenes in *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*.

¹⁷ Larocca, “Loneliness and Multitudes.”

¹⁸ See Figure 1 in the Appendix. Gregory Crewdson, “Untitled.” *Beneath the Roses*, 2007, <http://gregorycrewdson.tumblr.com/>

Russell Banks describes of Crewdson's work as the changeover time of day, where people perhaps reveal their secrets in these liminal moments.¹⁹ Dusk also serves an analogue for daybreak, again, suggesting the range of possible futures and past for the woman who sits on the curb outside the establishment. The only other concrete human action in the scene is a car receding from the viewer's perspective. The driver heads into the background with headlights on, again suggesting an indeterminacy of the time of day represented in the frame. The remainder of the landscape reinforces the small-town aesthetic of the location; clapboard houses, two-lane streets without traffic lights, and empty sidewalks consistent with a sparsely-populated locale. Thus, the viewer is left to ponder and consider possibilities for the people and the places depicted in "The Madison".

Moving beyond a formal reading of "The Madison" opens up ways of seeing how Crewdson's images are contingent on necessary elements of modern society, and not the depiction of the environs as they are. The haze in the background of the image suggests a driver heading into the unknown; the prospects of a new dawn or the myriad of nighttime possibilities. The aesthetic effect of the haze is intriguing until one comes to learn that the mist is not naturally occurring, but the output of smoke machines fitted on the back of trucks which traversed the street just before Crewdson's camera completed its shot.²⁰ The viewer sees standing water and the lingering effects of what was perhaps rain or even the watering of laws. Puddles form at the edges of driveways in the middle ground and trace intriguing lines in the foreground, drawing the viewer to see a uniquely carved out space for the woman straddling the sidewalk and the street. At first glance, the viewer may marvel upon the fortuitous events which aligned such

¹⁹ Gregory Crewdson: *Brief Encounters*.

²⁰ Gregory Crewdson: *Brief Encounters*.

creatively-dispersed condensation at the very dusk which Crewdson and company chose to take this photograph. In reality, Crewdson used thousands of gallons of water dispensed from fire trucks and hoses to water down at least two blocks of the street just prior to taking the photographs used in ‘The Madison.’²¹ It’s also worth noting that Crewdson and his production crew regularly disable the streetlights, traffic lights, or other public utilities when staging their photographs outside, away from a soundstage.²² In their place, Crewdson illuminates his photographs with high-intensity, cinematic lights positioned on cranes, scaffolding, and other types of rigging, all of which draw a tremendous amount of power from the local grid. Crewdson’s pursuit of capturing and representing the ideal light of dusk to enlighten the personal and social tensions is actually a facade, built on the very capacity to manipulate and amplify unnatural and unsustainable forms of power and illumination.

Electricity powers all of the buildings as well as the streetlights the woman sits beneath in the “The Madison”. Power poles frame the central space of the photograph and power lines traverse the main sight lines of the photograph, as well as the hieratic space in the foreground. Thus, electricity serves as a constant foundation and enabler of the people and spaces in “The Madison”; this scene would not exist without a reliable supply of this source of energy. Understanding the fiction of Crewdson’s staged photograph should be contrasted against the exact nature of energy consumption in the region. The state of Massachusetts consumes thousands upon trillions of British Thermal Units (BTUs) of energy each year, the majority coming from fossil fuels or other unsustainable sources.²³ There are four power plants local to

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² This process is explained and shown several times throughout the documentary, *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*.

²³ “Massachusetts Energy Consumption Rates-2015.” *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. Accessed 2 November 2017, <https://www.eia.gov/state/?sid=MA>

the Pittsfield area, two solar, one natural gas, and one based on petroleum liquids, which serve the communities where Crewdson works. Of the roughly 200 megawatt capacity of all four power plants, 98% of this energy comes from petroleum-based sources.²⁴ Thus, each intervention Crewdson makes in erecting lighting rigs and powering his production process both relies on and sustains the very materiality of a petro-dependent energy grid, to say nothing of the environmental impact of trucks transporting crews and equipment, scouting locations by car, and similar petro-centric activities. While Crewdson's intention is to draw the viewer's attention to the tensions and uncertainties for the woman seated on the curb, he ignores the ways in which both the representation of key elements of modern society facilitate the very existence of the image he is constructing as well the enabling of his production process in the first place. Moreover, reading Crewdson's photograph and underlying production from an ecocritical perspective reveals that he sees public utilities and nonrenewable resources as means to his creative ends; paid for one hopes by Crewdson and his patrons, but still a condition where artistic production is not simply a function of an artist's craft but derives from the extraction of public goods and resources.

Crewdson described another "Untitled" (Figure 2)²⁵ photograph --hereafter colloquially named 'Brief Encounter' --as, "the largest scale and most complicated photograph" in the *Beneath the Roses* project.²⁶ In this image, the viewer's focus moves center towards the familiar image of the car, headlights on, turning away towards the vanishing point of the photo. Light from an unseen source subtly-lights the driver inside the vehicle's cab, but the viewer is unable

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ See Figure 2 in the Appendix. Gregory Crewdson, "Untitled." *Beneath the Roses*, 2007, <http://gregorycrewdson.tumblr.com/>.

²⁶ *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*.

to discern any facial expressions from this perspective. The image of the woman in the restaurant in the right foreground is equally puzzling; clearly lit, but with her coat and hat still on, staring straight ahead across the table. She evokes a feeling of indeterminacy, waiting for the delivery of a menu, the serving of her food, or the arrival of a companion. Under the Capitol theater marquee which reads “Brief Encounter” a solitary man leans away from the viewer; perhaps simply walking away, perhaps stopping to contemplate entering the theater. The time of day depicted in the photograph --the last light of a winter’s dusk --suggests there is still time for the man or others to gather at the theater before the film begins. The viewer also finds similar indeterminacy and sparseness in the rest of the image. The car’s right turn track is among the few visible signs of automotive activity in the town’s center, hinting that most people in this unnamed community have avoided this central space. A tour bus is parked on the opposite side of the street, suggesting that there may be crowds in the town, but there are few visible lights on in the shops on that side of the road, and no evidence of the expected commercial hustle and bustle. Only the tattoo shop stands lit at the left side of the foreground, panels of flash open to the non-existent patrons who would normally fill this commercial intersection. The streetlights are unlit but reflect some luminescence, hinting at the uncertainty of what is to come. The traffic lights also reflect this liminality; all are showing yellow, a sign for caution, for transition, for a time and space in between concrete actions.

As with the initial formal analysis of “The Madison,” there is more to the story of the “Brief Encounter” photograph than Crewdson offers to his viewers. Shapiro’s documentary reveals how Crewdson and his crew secured permits to close off this half mile of space in what is normally a busy commercial center. Streetlights were again turned off, road signs removed, and

traffic signals reprogrammed for this particular shot. In their place, Crewdson used seventy-five programmable, cinematic lights on cranes and scaffolds to produce this photograph.²⁷ Even the snow depicted in the “Brief Encounter” image was a matter of productive consideration.

Crewdson and his director of photography Rick Sands actively debated whether or not to bring in snowmaking machines and crews up to and during the day of the shoot, should the forecasted half-foot of snow not fall from the sky. While the snowmaking machines were never called into service, it is not difficult to imagine the liquid and electrical resources required to create a half-mile of snow-covered landscape. Rather than thinking about the environmental impact of creating the scene in “Brief Encounter,” Crewdson is concerned that the very public utility crews employed to remove signs and turn off lights, were ruining his vision of snow on the street.

While Sands organized a crew to clear the evidence of human activity, Crewdson remarks to the camera that the landscape can be fixed in post-production; presumably through photo editing techniques.²⁸ Once again, and perhaps with all of Crewdson’s photographs, the work done to construct the image he wishes to convey his narrative runs counter to the material and social facts of life in The Berkshires. These communities are home to vibrant people, working in various trades against and through some of contemporary capitalism’s most punishing effects on non-urban America. Such towns are not spaces of desolation, of never ending liminality, or simply a narrow reflection of a singular artistic perspective. Crewdson’s otherly portrayal of small-town life wholly masks the unsustainable organization and consumption of public resources, especially electrical energy; a consumption that is at once unavailable to the people

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

which he photographs and simultaneously negatively affecting these communities' carbon footprint and petro-electrical dependency once Crewdson and company leave town.

The consistent and reliable presence of the electrical grid is critical to Crewdson's work, even though his focus is on the psychological and the ephemeral. The electrical infrastructure used by Crewdson to produce "The Madison" and "Brief Encounter" rests in large part by work General Electric (GE) did during the 20th century, enabling the people, as well as their homes and businesses to function and maintain themselves, though industries large and small have since vacated the periphery of western Massachusetts towards the state's metropole on the east coast. This electrical infrastructure and partnership with GE came at a price for people in Pittsfield and the surrounding communities, as GE's use of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) to build electrical transformers at their Pittsfield manufacturing plant left a trail of sustained contamination throughout western Massachusetts.²⁹ The cleanup of more than 600,000 pounds of spilled PCBs just in the Pittsfield area alone is still ongoing, even though GE left the area more than two decades ago, taking skilled labor salaries and commitments to the community with them. What's more, the current agreement of the cleanup of the contamination, a highly-public legal contestation occurring before, during, and after Crewdson's time making *Beneath the Roses*, is also under threat as GE is balking at the millions of dollars necessary to clean up the pollution, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency may seek to scrap and reset the entire cleanup process altogether.³⁰ Crewdson's interloping visits to these small towns and commitment to presenting the tensions and trials of suburban and rural life fail to adequately acknowledge or

²⁹ Meghna Chakrabarti and Jamie Bologna, "GE Left Behind A Complex Legacy In Pittsfield." *WBUR*, 20 June 2016, <http://www.wbur.org/radioboston/2016/06/29/ge-and-pittsfield>.

³⁰ David Abel, "EPA wants to reopen talks on GE cleanup." *Boston Globe*, 8 June 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/06/07/epa-raises-doubts-about-its-housatonic-river-cleanup-plan/WIKYc97ZS9NBvfMhzvBuAM/story.html>.

address a key material and social issue of Pittsfield and the surrounding area; that of a community dependent on an energy system that has poisoned rivers and redirected jobs away in pursuit of profitable and unsustainable energy production.

All of this is not to imply that grand scale artistic production, replete with crews of production assistants and workers, cannot or should not be produced. For example, as one reads Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, the viewer is directly confronted with the environmental themes of both the historical social and material themes she is working through, as well as the manufacturing of this gargantuan production. Crewdson's work could very well lend itself to a commitment to laboring in sustainable ways, even if his oeuvre and thematic considerations remain the same; he simply chooses not to. Such recommendations for a more sustainable artistic production process are not hypothetical. Crewdson and his team regularly shoot dozens of photographs for each of the tableaux he produces. From there, Crewdson and company employ photo editing software to alter the color, lighting, and even the individual subjects in a photograph.³¹ Crewdson produced several photos in *Beneath the Roses* on sound stages, where motels were built as scenery, artificial snow used in smaller volumes, and even different subjects in the same, final photograph are a bricolage of different still photographs. If Crewdson's photographic practice includes the employment of digital and cinematic techniques, is there really any need to consume large amounts of petro-sourced electricity in the field while also disrupting public signs and utilities which require laborious resetting after the fact? Is it necessary to drain water from aquifers and storage facilities to portray a rain-soaked street when

³¹ An excellent example of this can be seen in the scenes from *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters* surrounding the "Untitled" (Birth) photograph which involves a mother and newborn child. Crewdson and company use different exposures of all aspects of the photograph to construct the photograph using photo editing software and techniques which gives the viewer the impression that the image was taken in a single shot.

a soundstage can equally host such thematic representations and effects, or better yet digitally? Crewdson's flexibility, or perhaps more generously, sophistication in the construction of his photographs could point the way to a more sustainable and less environmentally impactful artistic practice. However, it is clear that Crewdson's artistic choices reflect little to no consideration of the environmental implications of his craft, leaving the viewer to raise serious and persistent ethical questions about Crewdson's portfolio, practice, and perhaps the pedagogy he employs in training new generations of photographic artists.

Perhaps one way of concluding the productive and representational critique of Crewdson's work centers on the question, 'who is responsible?' An unnamed shopkeeper poses this question in Shapiro's documentary, expressing a concern for the safety of his patrons walking in and out of his store, in response to the request of one of Crewdson's production assistants that he stop shoveling snow outside his storefront prior to the shooting of "Brief Encounter."³² This same production assistant ignores the shopkeeper's question and wishes, and the snow is simply replaced by Crewdson's production team prior to shooting "Brief Encounter." This tension between the objects of Crewdson's representations and his artistic production serves as a trope for his larger approach to his work when read through an environmental perspective. For Crewdson, responsibility begins and ends with his vision and artistic production, designed to explore his personal psychological tropes and travails. Crewdson opines, "I am only concerned with the moment of the picture...it is a privilege to not have to think about story line, plot, character development (and to) only focus on how to make that image as mysterious as possible."³³ Crewdson is not simply taking pictures of street scenes or staging individuals in

³² *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*

³³ *Ibid.*

photographs; he is constructing cinematic representations of an inner monologue with little regard for his consumption of nonrenewable energy and other resources involved in *Beneath the Roses*. Crewdson's self-articulated privilege to work at liminal moments blinds both himself and the viewer to more significant environmental material and social concerns for the community he objectifies in his photographs. The way out of this spiral of self-centered artistic ignorance is for both artists and audiences to consider the impact of their creative processes, and then engage in conversation about how we can imagine and build sustainable creative communities and practices. Such work would go a long way towards building inclusive cultures of aesthetic practice and patronage for ourselves and future generations.

Appendix



“Untitled” (The Madison)



“Untitled” (Brief Encounter)

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